

IRAQ AFTER THE COUP

The Pan-Arabs Take Over in Baghdad

RAY ALAN

ONLY the politically illiterate will charge Gamal Abdel Nasser with the July 14 coup in Iraq, but it is undeniable that a vicious Egyptian-Syrian propaganda campaign had helped create the emotional climate responsible for the worst atrocities of the uprising. Cairo Radio had been describing Nuri es-Said as a traitor and the "Arab Satan" for years, and Nasser's ally Salah Bitar, then Syrian Foreign Minister, eighteen months ago formally proposed that the Arab League "try" Nuri Pasha for treasonable collaboration with Anglo-American imperialism and, if necessary, order his "execution."

An Egyptian broadcast beamed to Iraq on the occasion of this year's Id el-Adha festival expressed sympathy with the Iraqi Moslems "forced to celebrate the holy feast under imperialist domination." When the Lebanese revolt broke out Cairo Radio informed its Iraqi and Jordanian listeners that their rulers, like Lebanon's President Chamoun, would "soon hang"; while during the first half of July, Nasser's "Voice of the Arabs" and "Voice of Free Iraq" repeatedly urged the Iraqis and Jordanians to revolt.

Propagandist words had been backed by conspiratorial deeds. As long ago as the fall of 1955 Iraq's British-supervised security service uncovered a plot to assassinate Nuri es-Said, organized by the Egyptian military

attaché in Baghdad, Lieutenant-Colonel Mohamed el-Hinnawi, who had also inspired a number of bomb outrages and the formation of a "Free Iraq" committee within the Iraqi army whose aim it was to overthrow the Hashemite regime. After the arrest of three of his henchmen, Hinnawi fled to Cairo (where he was given a senior appointment in the official Middle East News Agency) and the direction of Nasser's clandestine operations in Iraq was confided to the Syrian military attaché, Colonel Azem. In the winter of 1956 Nasser secured the formal alliance of an important Iraqi figure, Rashid Ali el-Gailani, leader of the anti-British rising of 1941, who traveled to Cairo from his exile in Saudi Arabia; thereafter Egyptian liaison with the pro-Gailani Istiqlal party of Iraq improved.

Economic pressure was likewise applied in the hope of toppling Nuri. When, on Egyptian orders, the Syrian army sabotaged the Iraq Petroleum Company's main pipeline in 1956, the Syrian Foreign Minister declared that the blow was directed against Nuri as well as the West: the pipeline would not be reopened until Iraq acquired a "national" regime. It was, in the end: because of Syria's own need of the revenue the oil transit brought her, and also because Nuri threatened to agree to the construction of a new IPC pipeline across Turkey, bypassing Syria.

But when all this has been noted, it is hard to dissent from the summing up of a Western-educated and temperamentally pro-Western Iraqi diplomat in Beirut who took down King Faisal's portrait and declared for the new regime immediately on receiving confirmation that the formidable Nuri was safely dead. "On July 14," he said, "the Hashemites reaped what they and the Brit-

IN THE July COMMENTARY, the impact of the Algerian war on France was discussed by RAY ALAN, a noted political observer with close personal experience of Arab affairs. Now, Mr. Alan takes up the subject of the recent military coup in Iraq and throws light on the chief leaders, their affiliations and orientations, and the broad forces behind the new regime, insofar as they are known to experts stationed in the area.

ish had spent the previous twenty years or more sowing. Gamal Abdel Nasser simply lubricated the combine-harvester." The timing of the coup, the mechanism of which had been planned months earlier by Brigadier-General Abdel-Karim Qassim (now Prime Minister) and his associates, was decided not by Nasser but by an order transferring Qassim's brigade to Jordan—presumably to buttress King Hussein against rising unrest, though some officers believe they would then have been transferred to Lebanon. After initial denials their friends now admit that the authors of the coup agreed from the outset that King Faisal, Crown Prince Abdul-Illah, and Nuri must be killed so as to avoid any possibility of their escaping and legitimizing a British intervention as in 1941. Shortly after the attack on the royal palace, Iraqi troops encircled the British base at Habbaniya and denied it communication with the outside world to make doubly sure (trebly sure, if, as seems probable, the sacking of the British embassy in Baghdad was part of the same precautionary plan).

THE marvel was that the Iraqi oligarchy had survived purely internal stresses so long. The present writer reported in *COMMENTARY* in March 1954: "The closer one's scrutiny, the stronger one's impression that Iraq's whole political edifice, from foundation to summit, is as shoddy and as unsteady as a Baghdad slum." Nuri es-Said was the most hated man in the Arabic-speaking Near East; and, despite its claim to descent from the Prophet, the Hashemite royal family was never more than patchily popular in Iraq. (Something of a legend was built up around the memory of Iraq's first king, the statesmanlike Faisal ibn Hussein, but the only Iraqi ruler popular in his lifetime was the anti-British Ghazi who died in an automobile crash at the age of twenty-six.) The Hashemites were Sunnis (orthodox Moslems) whereas most Iraqi Arabs are Shiites. (Iraq's Kurds, to be sure, are Sunnis, but they disliked the Hashemites because they were Arabs.) The difference be-

tween Sunnis and Shiites is sometimes compared to that between Protestants and Roman Catholics; in fact it is much greater. Above all, few articulate Iraqis ever forgot that it was the British who installed Faisal in Baghdad in 1920 after organizing a Nasser-type plebiscite showing a 96 per cent vote in his favor. "Politics running on wheels greased with extremely well-melted grease," was how the Orientalist and political officer Gertrude Bell, who helped organize the plebiscite, described the operation—a phrase Nuri quoted approvingly more than once. It is a phrase that says a great deal about Anglo-Hashemite political relations—all merchandising and no content—from the campaign to put over Faisal I in 1920 to the election last year whereby Nuri secured a parliament favorable to the Baghdad Pact; it sums up the over-confidence, the indifference to social evolution, and the belief in the infinite gullibility of the Arab masses, which led Nuri to a hideous death in the dusty robes of an old woman, and Anglo-American diplomats and security chiefs to express their astonishment at an event every Baghdad beggar knew was inevitable.

Some time before the coup, this writer was given a copy of a letter that had been smuggled out of what English-speaking Iraqis called "Nuri's concentration camp" at Naqrat es-Salman. Its writer had been arrested for criticizing the government. So had most of his fellow internees, only a few of whom had a clearly defined republican or socialistic orientation; some were workers who had tried to form a labor union. (Officially, i.e. according to Nuri, they were all Communists or Zionists.) Their living quarters, he wrote, were "best described as tombs. . . . There are no windows and no light can enter. Not even a child can pass into them without bending. Many of the internees have become consumptive without hope of recovery and those who live with them are exposed to infection. . . . Water is scarce, meat and fruit are non-existent. . . . There is no doctor to attend the sick."

In 1952 Nuri issued a decree making it an offense to criticize the conduct of elec-

tions. During the 1952 electoral campaign he bought tribal votes by transferring tracts of state domain to the more influential sheikhs. On the eve of the 1954 election, which cleared the way for the creation of the Baghdad Pact, he banned four political parties and thirty-one newspapers and periodicals. The normally pro-Hashemite Lebanese daily *el-Hayat* described the Baghdad Pact parliament as "a Chamber of Relatives." "For the first time in history," it noted, "a Prime Minister has appointed all his relations to parliament: the only relatives of Nuri es-Said who do not sit in the Chamber are those he has already appointed to the Senate. . . . Eighty per cent of the deputies were imposed on the electorate by the government." Yet all that Western diplomats seemed to notice about Iraq was the fact that, as the State Department's Henry Byroade naively remarked, its rulers "speak out strongly against Communism." A leading U.S. news magazine even gave Iraq the headline: "A Strong Link in Middle East Chain."

Asked at a major press conference, only a few days before laying the foundations of the Baghdad Pact, whether he intended to join any Western or Western-inspired pact, Nuri replied: "No, definitely not." After the pact's creation he declared repeatedly that it was "directed primarily against Israel." Asked why the Western powers were supplying Iraq with such vast quantities of arms if, as he claimed, Iraq had undertaken no obligations toward the West, Nuri threw his hands in the air and laughed: "Who knows? Maybe they're mad!" Historians at a loss to explain this phase of the West's Middle East antics may one day concede him a point there.

THE West's discomfiture in mid-July was all the harder to understand if one recalled that Iraq has known more military coups d'état (seven in all) than any other Near Eastern country. In the middle 30's, dissident generals even ordered the Iraqi air force into action against the civil government in Baghdad. Moreover, it has for some

years been the accepted pattern of Arab politics that the new military, mercantile, and professional middle class, denied electoral access to power, should wrest it from their dominant hereditary and/or landowning oligarchies by military force. The more arms Britain, America, and Russia pour into the Arab states, the more they inflate the importance and power of the officer corps, the easier it becomes for the latter to seize power, and the likelier it is that the new middle class regime will degenerate into a military dictatorship. Syria, Egypt, Lebanon (1952), Jordan (briefly, in 1956 and 1957), and Iraq had already, in varying degrees, illustrated this process. On July 14 Brigadier Qassim and his collaborators merely brought it to fruition in Iraq, having taken pains to digest the lessons of Rashid Ali's defeat in 1941. Tomorrow it may be Saudi Arabia's turn, and the U.S. officials who have gone out of their way to bring into being and equip that country's increasingly restless military caste will no doubt be the first to express their amazement.

Civilians outnumber officers in the new Iraqi government (though the administrative purge now under way is expected to herald fresh military appointments to key civil service posts) and the emergence of a full-blooded military dictatorship on the Nasser model is by no means inevitable: much will depend on external developments and the new regime's economic competence and social perspicacity. Colonel Mohamed Abdessalam Aref, the assertive young Deputy Premier and Minister of the Interior, who played a major part in whipping up the frenzy of the mob on the morning of July 14, has been tipped as the Nasser of the movement, but Qassim, who is Defense Minister and Commander-in-Chief as well as Premier, looks to be made of sterner stuff than was Neguib in Cairo. Their principal civilian allies, Mohamed Mahdi Kubbah and Sadiq Shenshal, are also strong-minded characters with a following in both the army and the street.

Mohamed Mahdi Kubbah, now fifty-two, was vice-president of the pan-Islamic, pro-

Nazi Muthanna Club in the middle 30's. In 1946, with Sadiq Shenshal and other former supporters of Rashid Ali (Shenshal had been Rashid Ali's director of propaganda, and later fled to Germany where he made several pro-Nazi broadcasts in Arabic) Kubbah founded the Istiqlal (Independence) party, which appealed at once to lower- and middle-grade army officers, merchants, politically underprivileged "intellectuals," and rambunctious youths of all classes. Anti-British, anti-Turkish, anti-Christian, and anti-Jewish, infected to some extent by Nazi "race" theories, the party was outstanding even by Arab standards for its virulent xenophobia. Its leaders' skill in manipulating the mob is attested by their organization of the great anti-treaty riots of 1948 and 1952. Istiqlal has consistently advocated a neutralist foreign policy, and from 1952 on collaborated with the Communists against Nuri. Mohamed Mahdi Kubbah praised Egypt's neutral stand in the Korean war. He has said that "even if the West atones for its errors in Palestine" the Arabs should not offer the West bases or assistance: the furthest they can go is to undertake "not to attack the West." On the inter-Arab plane, the Istiqlal leaders would like to see a union of Iraq, Syria, and Kuwait, governed from Baghdad: they have never appeared enthusiastic over the idea of Egyptian domination.

Brigadier Qassim's and Colonel Aref's relations with the Istiqlal are believed in Baghdad to be a flirtation rather than an infatuation, Aref being more closely in sympathy with the party than his chief is. They both appear to share its views on the desirability of Iraqi leadership of the Fertile Crescent states. They would be likely to affiliate to the United Arab Republic (Egypt plus Syria) only if they felt themselves insecure or in need of some spectacular gesture to compensate for an economic or diplomatic reverse. Iraqis generally take a highly possessive view of their country's oil income, and objected to the Hashemite union with Jordan not only for political reasons but because it involved their subsidizing Hussein's desti-

tute kingdom. They are in no hurry to subsidize Egypt, whose grievous endemic poverty is worsened by Nasser's reckless military expenditure. The portraits of Nasser which blossomed in every quarter of Baghdad in the first few days of the new regime were thinning out by the end of July, and pro-Nasser slogans have been obliterated by military work parties. Baghdad Radio has broadcast a call for closer economic ties between the Iraqi republic and "Aleppo and northern Syria" (not the United Arab Republic as such): Aleppo's traditionally Iraqi-orientated business and intellectual circles would exchange their economically disadvantageous tie with distant Egypt tomorrow for one with a potentially prosperous Iraq, given the opportunity.

THE constitutional gap left by the liquidation of the monarchy has been filled temporarily by a three-man Council of State presided over by Major-General Najib er-Rubai, a wealthy sixty-year-old conservative. Rubai won this distinction by participating in an abortive Saudi plot to assassinate Nuri; the latter, prevented by the rules of the inter-Arab *jeu de massacre* from executing or imprisoning a plotter enjoying King Saud's personal protection, mockingly appointed him Iraqi Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and advised him not to return to Baghdad in a hurry. The Council's other members are Colonel Khalid Naqshabandi—a brisk, vigorous Kurd with little time for the Nasser mystique, but even less for Western pact-mongering—and Mohamed Mahdi Kubbah. As Rubai is a Sunni Arab and Kubbah a Shiite, the Council of State is thus neatly representative of Iraq's three main communities. The composition of the Cabinet—not all of whose members were privy to the plot—was equally carefully worked out to win the authors of the coup the widest possible acceptance. After Qassim and Aref, its most important member is the Istiqlal co-founder and wartime Nazi propagandist Sadiq Shenshal who has been appointed Minister of Information and "National Guidance." The Foreign Minister, in con-

trast, is the French-educated Dr. Abdel-Jabar Jomard, an anti-pact neutralist but culturally a Westernizer. (He was purring loudly at British and American diplomats within forty-eight hours of the coup.) Brigadier-General Najib Talib, Minister for Social Affairs, is an admirer of Nasser who spent some time at Sandhurst, the British military academy which vies with Harrow school in the production of anti-British Arab leaders. The cool, competent Baba Ali, Minister of Public Works, is that rare Near Eastern phenomenon, an "Americanized" Kurd: when his father, the famous Kurdish rebel Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji, was expelled by the Hashemites into Persia, Baba Ali was packed off to a British college in Alexandria, Egypt, and from there went to Columbia University.

There is even a disciple of the late Harold Laski in the Cabinet, in the person of the Finance Minister, Mohamed Hadid, a wealthy Mosul notable. Educated at the American University of Beirut and the London School of Economics, he helped Kamil el-Chadirchi launch the National Democratic party whose political philosophy had something in common with that of the pre-war British Labor party. Disillusioned by Ernest Bevin's cynical exploitation of Arab nationalism and above all by Bevin's decision to make the Hashemite regime in Iraq the "cornerstone" of his Near Eastern policy, the National Democrats veered off into neutralism and soon became strongly anti-Western. Bevin and his advisers not only cold-shouldered groups like the Iraqi National Democrats, which an enlightened policy could have saved from Moscow's embrace, but actually encouraged the Arab governments to suppress them. It is hardly surprising that they reacted with a violently leftward jerk. Their organ, *Sada el-Ahali*, put the blame for the Korean war on "American aggression" and in 1954 they entered into an electoral pact with the Istiqlal and the Communists whereby all three groups agreed to campaign for nationalization of the Iraq Petroleum Company and certain other Western-owned enterprises, and for a neu-

tral foreign policy. Yet informed Iraqi observers favorable to the new regime attach no ideological significance to Hadid's appointment: they regard it as a purely technical and tactical one, a sop to keep the National Democrats happy while the army-Istiqlal coalition tightens its hold on the country. Hadid is a mild-mannered rationalist who scarcely speaks the same language as his Istiqlal colleagues. He has no control over the ministries for Economic Affairs and Development, both of which would have to be dovetailed into any ambitious program of nationalization and social reform.

THE Iraq Petroleum Company (which is British-managed but owned by American, French, and Dutch as well as British parent companies) seems certain to be nationalized one day—probably overnight, for propagandist rather than ideological reasons, to divert attention from a failure or setback in some other sphere; but for the time being official circles in Baghdad are assuring Western representatives that they will settle for a revision of the fifty-fifty profit shareout in their favor. An Iraqi official has declared "off the record" that the Russians are willing to extract and market Iraqi oil for only 10 per cent of the profits, but this may be no more than a bid to soften up the IPC in advance of negotiations. Of Iraq's average annual oil income of \$200 million a year, 70 per cent has hitherto been devoted to long-term development projects and 30 per cent to the ordinary budget, but owing to the Suez crisis—in particular the sabotage of the IPC's main pipeline—revenue dipped sharply in 1956-57. A showdown now with the IPC would result in a severe financial crisis and unemployment both in the oil fields and on development projects—an inauspicious beginning the new regime clearly wishes to avoid.

Development money was, on the whole, spent wisely by the old regime, in accordance with a rational British master plan, and publicly accounted for. But while it enriched contractors and merchants and raised property values, its benefits had not yet seeped

down to the peasants, living at subsistence level, who make up about 75 per cent of Iraq's population; and to the average townsman "development" all too often signified luxurious new villas and television antennas for the entrepreneurial and mercantile middle class, but a mud shack in a slum for himself. The fact that this prosperous, if hitherto politically underprivileged, middle class has now come to power will not of itself appease the awakening peasantry and urban proletariat, once the ecstatic echoes of July 14 have faded. For Iraq's masses July 14 was only half a revolution. Like all such regimes, the Qassim coalition is promulgating a stop-gap, cheer-raising program of minor rural reform and urban improvement, for which funds are to be siphoned off longer-term projects. But before long it will have to decide whether to take the plunge into a fundamental reorganization of Iraqi society that will bring it into conflict with the powerful landowning sheikhs and an important section of its own nouveau riche following—or, like Colonel Shishakli six years ago in Syria (and Nasser in Egypt) to buy time by exploiting mob xenophobia and picking a succession of foreign quarrels. The past record of the Istiqlal party and the political and economic inexperience of the military chiefs might lead one to expect that the latter course will be chosen, except for a small number of positive factors: Iraq possesses a sounder and much faster-expanding economy and a cleaner administration than Syria and Egypt when Shishakli and Nasser took over; the new rulers already have for their guidance an excellent blueprint for nationwide development, and the men and funds to put it into effect; they also have the flops of Shishakli and Nasser in the social and economic fields as a double warning against following their example.

AS NOTED above, the Baghdad mob (accompanied by a detachment of armed soldiers) gave the same priority to the sack-ing of the British Embassy as to the attack on King Faisal's palace. And just as Britain could have had no more appropriate Prime

Minister at the time of her Suez debacle than Sir Anthony Eden, godfather of the Arab League, so, on Baghdad's day of wrath, she could have had no more fitting Ambassador to Iraq than Sir Michael Wright. Political chickens have a startling propensity for developing vulturine characteristics in the Near East, and it is only just that those who hatch them be on the spot when they return to roost. No one had done more than Sir Michael to yoke successive British Foreign Secretaries to the Hashemite regime in Iraq. Unfortunately for the Ministers who lapped up his advice, few diplomats were more tragically out of touch with Iraqi sentiment. Did the 1948 riots which wrecked Bevin's projected Anglo-Iraqi treaty indicate that the idea of a military alliance with Britain might, perhaps, be a wee bit unpopular in Iraq? Nonsense! It was all a matter of technique and timing: scare the day-lights out of the Arabs with the Zionist bogey, and they'd clamor for a treaty. . . .

The rambling, rather dingy "house by the river" looked more like the "secretariat" of a small backwater colony than a modern embassy: its very appearance grated on Iraqi susceptibilities the reminder that the Kingdom of Iraq had to a great extent been shaped by decisions taken within its walls. But Iraqi nationalists might have been less harsh on Nuri Pasha had they realized the weight his words carried there. Nuri was no mere puppet: if, for example, he learned of the presence of two junior members of the British government at a pro-Zionist gathering in London he did not hesitate to fire off a letter of protest—and his protest was received with something like deference. "If I want to know what the British are going to do next in the Near East I watch Nuri," the Turkish Ambassador said. "Not because they will have told Nuri, but because he will have told them."

The July 14 coup liberated the British Foreign Office (as well as the Iraqi people) from Nuri's stifling embrace. Anglo-Iraqi relations may be a few degrees less fervid from now on, but they will be that much healthier. The emancipation extends to other

Western powers, too. French officials in the Levant saw something doubly symbolic in the sacking of Britain's Baghdad Embassy on—of all days—July 14, and ebulliently urged Paris to recognize the new regime before Britain and America: released from their stultifying forty-year-old feud with the Iraqi Hashemites, they feel themselves a long stride forward toward the French-Arab rapprochement which both General de Gaulle and his able and scholarly Foreign Minister, M. Couve de Murville, desire. Mr. Dulles, liberated from a politically onerous and militarily treacherous illusion, can now take a fresh hard look at the "northern tier" and the Near East in general. He will find the issues plainer, the perspectives clearer. He should be able to recognize the folly of funneling arms into unstable states that require them only for internecine quarrels—and for use against the West's friends. He may even conclude that since a majority of Arabs are attracted by neutralism it is better

to have them neutral with our blessing than against us.

Left to themselves, the Iraqi and Egyptian leaders will have quite enough to occupy them in putting their internal affairs in order and settling the future of Syria, Kuwait, Jordan, and possibly Saudi Arabia. True, there is always a possibility of their moving away from their difficulties in the direction of Israel: like the Arab League, they may be tempted to plaster over their discords with anti-Israel provocation and propaganda. But Western statesmen can no longer be in any doubt as to how to nip that problem in the bud. The failures of the old school have at least taught a valuable lesson in that subject. If the Western powers can make it clear that they are not prepared to contemplate the whittling away of Israel, they will both spare themselves further blackmail on this issue and help the Arabs transfer their political energies to more constructive purposes.

THE SIREN OF THE KITCHEN

DAVID GALLER

NOT all her day foundered between sink and stove,
As raves would have us think. To watch her hand
Beguile us pigs at supper with sharp stews
And a kind clout, one learned that such scenes derive
From some tradition: her praise stung like a brand,
Disgrace bred rage, and rage broke down as blues
That made despair worth dredging. Our whole lives
Could have been spent unraveling sweetness from
Her hate! Instead, how guileful we have become,
Reeling between a Scylla that contrives
To snap off, one by one, our heads that sprout
Decisions, and black pit of mothering doubt.
No, that is not all. Sometimes, we gaze back
Across the simmering leagues, and we hear out
The music of her eyes, flashing from their rock.

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